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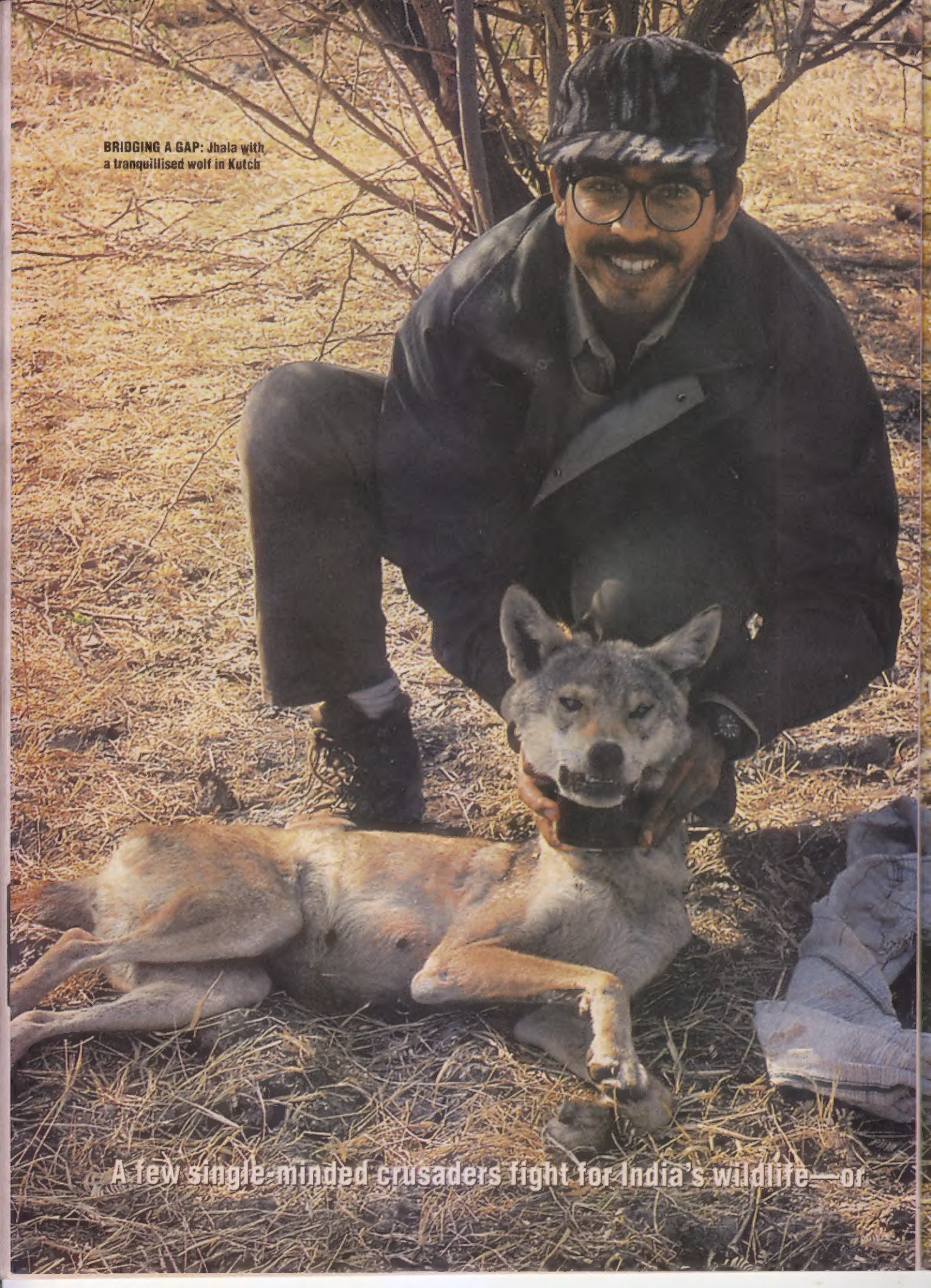


ECO Warriors

As India's wildlife rapidly vanishes, a few single-minded crusaders fight for what's left of it. This is their story.

**Wildlife scientist Y.V. Jhala
with a tranquillised wolf in Kutch**

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A man with a mustache and glasses, wearing a dark jacket and a cap, is crouching in a dry, brushy landscape. He is smiling and looking at the camera. In front of him, a grey and brown wolf is lying down, looking towards the camera. The wolf has a dark collar around its neck. The ground is covered in dry grass and twigs. The background shows more dry brush and trees.

BRIDGING A GAP: Jhala with
a tranquillised wolf in Kutch

A few single-minded crusaders fight for India's wildlife—or

GREEN BERETS

■ by Vijay Jung THAPA

AS THE MOONLIGHT CUTS SILVER STREAKS ACROSS THE thorny desert, Yadavendradev Jhala crouches next to a large cactus bush waiting for his "wolf family" to arrive. The wildlife scientist has been tracking this particular pack of wolves for days across the scrubby wilderness of the dome-shaped landmass the locals call Kutch, which translates literally to turtle. Suddenly, his companion—the local tracker—taps him on his shoulder. Jhala jerks his head up to see the shining eyes of the alpha (dominant) male in the enveloping darkness. A few metres ahead a smaller animal, the alpha female, forages in the shadows. But Jhala quickly senses something isn't right—the rest of the pack is missing, so too are the litter of pups he knows the alpha couple have had. Next morning, under a glittering-blue sky, an investigation of the pack's den confirms his fears. It has been burnt and stuffed with thorns. Hours later, they track down the "killer" in the nearby settlement—an 18-year-old shepherd who had lost two out of his six goats to the pack. The boy had simply followed the drag marks of the goats, discovered the den and blocked it with boulders. Later, he'd returned with more accomplices, smoked the pups out and smashed their heads with a lathi.

"This kind of killing is a common occurrence," says Jhala, who is known for his iconoclastic studies on Indian wolves. Of late, he says, villagers have started using poison (spraying it around the den); Jhala's studies indicate that 70 per cent of all recorded wolf mortalities were due to this. "If this trend continues, we will soon lose the entire carnivore guild of Kutch." Wolves, even though they're known to be a hardy race, are on the endangered list of Indian wildlife. Once they roamed around large parts of the country, scouring the landscape in numerous packs. Today, the northern tip of Kutch holds the biggest wolf population in the country—and even that is threatened.

Unless one man can do something about it, Jhala's plan to save the Indian wolf is twofold. By his research, he plans to paint the wolf in a totally new light that bridges the "unbridgeable" chasm between man and animal; the wolf isn't the cunning, dangerous vermin that eats livestock and carries away the occasional human baby but is a supersmart carnivore that is capable, like us, of feeling happiness, pain and anger. The other thrust of Jhala's struggle is to build a national management strategy for wolves. His five-year study (it will continue for another three) has painstakingly collected data on diet, pack behaviour, gene pool and habitat.

what's left of it

R. V. JHALA

Jhala's plan for this proud animal is to use this data to identify a handful of ideal wolf fortresses—and then efficiently manage them with a good conservation plan backed with scientific data. Given the voracious human appetite for land, even he knows achieving this would be nothing short of a miracle. "But," he adds, "one has to keep trying."

The plight of the wolves only symbolises the tragic fate of Indian wildlife today. At the dawn of Independence, forests draped the country like an elegant green gown—covering more than half the land—nourishing and protecting wildlife. Today, this very gown is in tatters, slashed by human interests, covering only 4 per cent of the country. Human beings are the only ones who possess the power to snuff life out of all other species in the world. It's a formidable power, one that can so easily turn malevolent—and how we handle that capacity defines our nature. Unfortunately for us Indians, we've been more than malevolent—we've been natural born killers. Where we've failed is to understand that the earth is one intricate ecosystem of links by which all life is shaped. Lose one species, and a thousand others will be on the brink eventually threatening our survival.

SO this isn't a story about wildlife. This is about us. More specifically, a few among hundreds of others who have decided to fight it out to the end—so long as there are animals in the wild. These are people like Jhala who battle—day in and day out—in the little swathes of forest that hold our wildlife. Unsung, unheralded, unnoticed, they lead their lives with courage and conviction—fighting at every step a callous government, a corrupt Forest Department and a continually growing human population. They are our Heroes of Wildlife, though they hardly see themselves as such. To them, success would come only if millions of other Indians joined in their struggle.

Driven by nothing but a deep concern that comes from within, they know that all they can look forward to is a continuous struggle, with no rewards. But talk to them and their visions grip you—the mind experiences a kind of electricity, there's a thrill of beginning again, of seeing a new world where man and animal learn to co-exist in peace. They know that the war for most species has already been lost—it's just a matter of when (not if) they will fall into that dark abyss of extinction.

Still they fight. This is their story.

On a Manhunt

VIVEK MENON

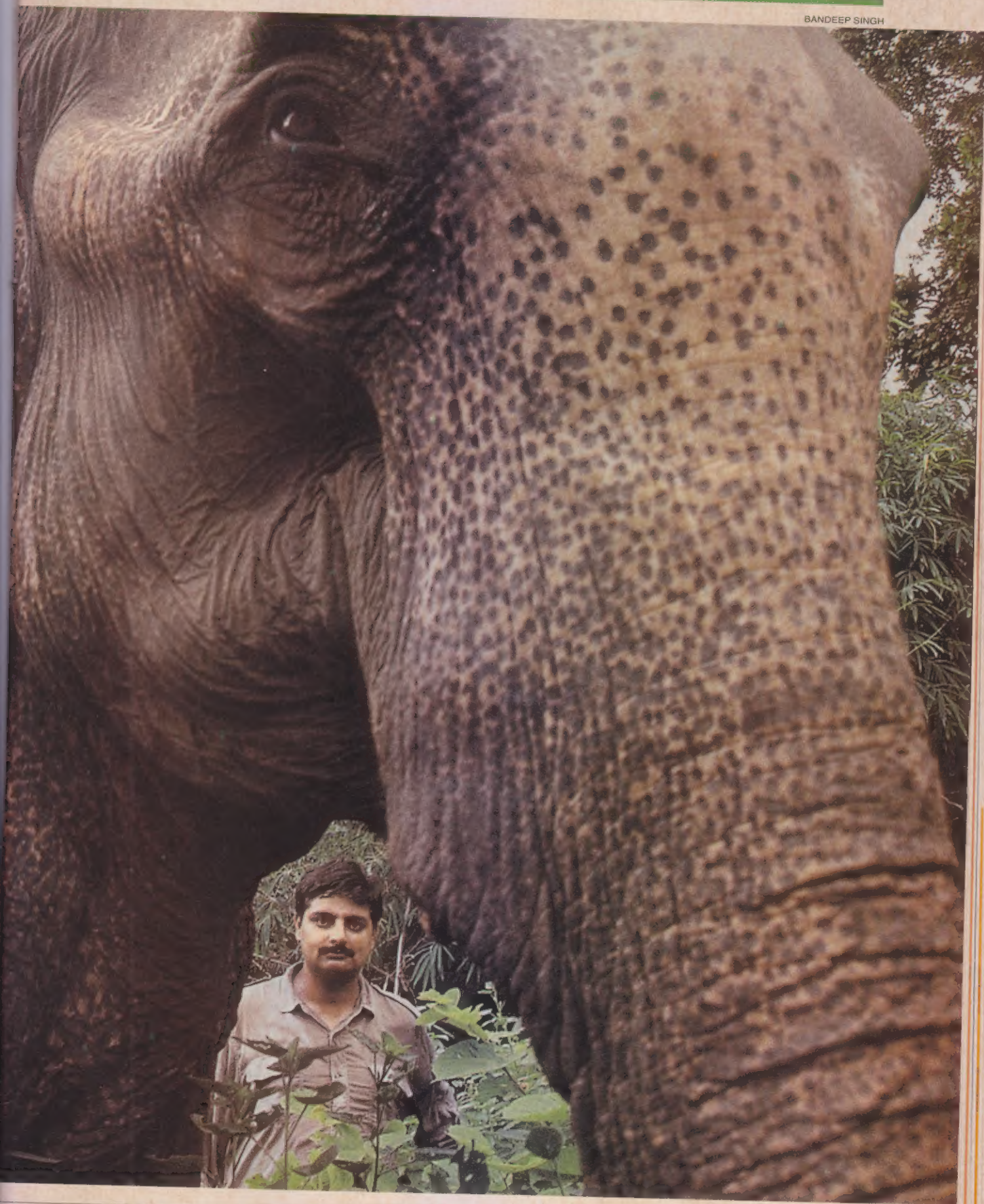
WHEN Vivek Menon talks, you freeze. It's not just his pent-up passion—it's a combination of the volume (he's by far the loudest in the room), his fluctuating tonal stresses, his large unblinking eyes that keep you in focus and a brutal frankness that bludgeons you. Here's a man who wills you to listen.

But you're listening anyway—because he's furiously blowing the whistle on poaching. Menon's biggest contribution to wildlife has been to detail how poacher gangs operate. His research, which often involves contacting the underworld, setting up deals, then seizing the merchandise and getting the poachers arrested, is like a handbook of how poachers kill and send the merchandise to other countries through clandestine trade routes. Over the years, Menon's efforts have helped bring down rhino poaching to about 30 a year (down from 50). More importantly, he played an integral role in re-enforcing an international trade ban on ivory which was lifted in 1997. That year we lost 120 elephants. Today, with the ban in place we lose up to 70 a year.

Menon feels the bigger problem is that the Government plays deaf when it comes to wildlife. No matter. Menon, who now runs an NGO, clocks in 24 hours fighting it out himself. One area of focus is the impoverished, ill-equipped and miserable lot of forest guards who, armed with lathis, are expected to take on poachers with AK 47s. Menon, with his colleagues, holds regular camps motivating them, teaching them how to file legal cases against poachers, giving them infrastructure like jeeps and uniforms and even setting up a "Van Rakshak" award. "No, we should not give up hope. We should believe there is still a chance to keep our treasures intact," he says.

—Vijay Jung Thapa





Anointing the Young

K.M. CHINAPPA

THERE may come a time in the not-too-distant future when children would only get to see a tusker as *Jungle Book*'s Colonel Haathi—a cartoon figure. But not if good men like K.M. Chinappa can help it. A forester by profession, he has dedicated his life to sparking the imaginations of little minds in the wild. The core of Chinappa's philosophy is simple: keep children interested in wildlife—they will be the future guardians of our forests. So almost like a religious ritual Chinappa everyday, like the Pied Piper of Nagarhole in Karnataka, leads groups of children deep into the forests, explaining the basics of what biodiversity really means and why we need to save it.

DEEPAK G. PAWAR



It wasn't always like this, though. Son of a small-time coffee planter of Kakoor village in Kodagu district, Chinappa worked in the Nagarhole forest area for nearly 40 years until he voluntarily retired. And he was a legend in his time. He had, through sheer motivation, transformed his not-so-well-organised guards into highly effective anti-poaching patrols. Unlike a lot of foresters, he had a deep conviction that forests were meant for animals and nothing else. It is now part of recorded history that his career was fraught with all kinds of struggles against poachers, the timber mafia and local contractors. And people haven't forgotten that. Says well-known wildlife biologist Ulhas Karanth: "People like Chinappa are the ones in the frontline of protecting our animals."

And so it goes, on and on. Chinappa moves with a band of his colleagues all over the state helping children comprehend why tigers are related to water-catchment or why elephants strip the bark off trees. As these children weave their weary way home, their young minds firmly imprinted with the need to save the tiger, Chinappa smiles. "That's what I want to do—keep moving, keep teaching." Tomorrow, it will be another village and another set of children.

—Stephen David



JOANNA VAN GRUISEN



Conservation Catalyst

RAGHU CHUNDAWAT

UNDER the bright lights in a big city, Raghu Chundawat, wildlife scientist, is awkwardly shy. But it's completely misleading. For there is an animation and vibrancy that lie restless under the exterior. The magic word is big cats. Speak of them and he is suddenly energised; walk with him in the wilderness and every sense, once seeming dull, is on full alert. He will cock his ear to a sound you haven't heard, hold you back from treading on a pug mark. This is his domain, this is where he is best evaluated.

Growing up as a kid in Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh, he had his heart set on being a cricketer till he saw an alluring advertisement seeking volunteers for a survey on snow leopards. By the end, the "grey ghost" of the Himalayas hooked

him and made him opt for a PhD on snow leopards—leading to a seminal study on the elusive creature. Chundawat now battles hard to save the snow leopard's habitat—his study having determined that there is, contrary to extant information, a sizeable population in the trans-Himalayan region. But that's changing fast. His efforts are directed towards bringing more snow-leopard habitats under the protected areas network and extending the existing ones with varied success. For 50 snow leopards in the trans-Himalayan region to exist in peace, an area of 1,275 sq km is considered viable. "What I'm trying to do is build a blueprint for the survival of the snow leopard," he says

—Vijay Jung Thapa



BISWAJIT MOHANTY

Turning Turtle

HE made the leap from wildlife lover to wildlife activist while getting an innocuous haircut in a Cuttack saloon. Somebody in the saloon was talking about tiger skins that were up for sale and Biswajit Mohanty, whose ears pricked up, quickly joined the conversation. Before he knew it, he was sucked into a shadowy world full of criminals in the wildlife trade. After five months of relentless pursuit, the trail finally ended up in a Bhubaneswar hut in which lay hidden a rich haul of 21 leopard skins. By then, Mohanty, a practising chartered accountant, knew his life would never be the same.

Today, five years later into a new profession, Mohanty and the Wildlife Society of Orissa have grown in stature and earned enough goodwill to become household names. And one of the main reasons is Mohanty's sterling protection work done on those mysterious, endangered creatures called Olive Ridley Turtles. Till a while back, death used to pockmark the golden sands of Gahirmatha where thousands of these turtles would come every year to lay their eggs. Slashed by the propeller blades of fishing trawlers or caught in fishing nets, the death toll of the turtles from 1991 to 1996 was 50,000. In the next two years, even as Mohanty and his colleagues started Operation Kachchap the turtles had turned wise, they just did not show up. But last year, as if to reward his efforts, the turtles (2.5 lakh of them) returned. Mohanty's relentless patrolling, banning trawler activity during nesting and ensuring fishing nets have specialised turtle extruder devices—all made a difference. Says Mohanty: "The Ridleys can breathe easy now." Their tribe is poised to multiply.

—Ruben Banerjee



SANJIB MUKERJEE



Trouble

SUBROTO PAL CHOWDHURY

WITH his pudgy face crinkling in a smile, eyes disappearing behind voluminous cheeks, a rotund belly thrust forward, he doesn't look like a hero and refuses to believe he's one. He even has difficulty defining his job. His card says, "Technical Assistant, West Bengal wildlife wing". But that says little about a man best known as the "trouble shooter" for disturbed animals all over the country.

In an era where humans today live cheek by jowl with animals, conflicts between them are increasingly on the rise. Animals, especially the bigger ones, stumble into human territory, creating havoc. But Subroto Pal Chowdhury handles them all with ease. To date, he has helped 55

Herd Instinct

K.N. CHANGAPPA

HOW do you define this man? Planter, estate manager, or conservationist? To the 9,000-odd Mudhuvan tribals and the one lakh-plus Tata Tea employees and their families in Munnar's rolling High Ranges, K.N. Changappa is liked, respected, feared, a man who could move mountains if he willed. To the 900 endangered Nilgiri tahrs (mountain goats) at the Eravikulam National Park in Munnar (home to more than half the world's population of tahrs), he's an undisputed saviour, a man whose touch can be reassuring against the stabbing cold of the hills.

But for the unbridled, no-compromises campaigning of the 54-year-old conservationist—senior manager of Tata's tea estates in Munnar—Eravikulam, the only viable habitat of the Nilgiri tahr in the world, would have been long wiped out. Until one man stepped in and decided to harness corporate support for wildlife. In 1975, Eravikulam was just a sanctuary with a depleting tahr population. Mostly through his efforts, Eravikulam today is a national sanctuary and is the only park in the country which is jointly run and patrolled by the Forest Department and the High Range Wildlife and Environment Preservation Association, made by Tata Tea employees. Says Changappa: "My greatest achievement is winning the confidence of every animal I am protecting."

—Methil Renuka

Shooter

elephants, 13 rhinos, a clutch of big cats, monkeys and deer—which strayed into "civilisation"—by tranquillising them and releasing them back into the wild. He's helped an elephant calf that fell into a well, even lowered a table fan "so it wouldn't suffocate". He has rescued a tigress stuck on top of a 25-ft-tall date tree by stretching a net below—"she landed with the grace of a trapeze artist". He's carried a dolphin caught in a lockgate in the Damodar river in a soft nylon hammock all the way to the Ganga—"I had to hose it down right through the seven-hour drive".

Chowdhury loves his job as it needs constant innovation and a keen understanding of animal psychology. "I guess I'm a wildlifer," he says laughing, "serving out a life term in the wilds."

—Labonita Ghosh

BHASKAR PAUL

